

# **MEDIUMS of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

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### CHAPTER III

#### THE SYMPATHETIC SYSTEM

THE men who, because of the theory of physical effluence which informed all the speculations of the Animal Magnetisers, rejected the genuine phenomena of the induced trance, were, no doubt, justified in their suspicions of the theory. For, in fact, not only did Mesmer borrow his theories ready-made from earlier mystics, but even the name "magnetic" was in common use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to denote the sympathetic system of medicine which was founded on those mystical doctrines. Paracelsus is commonly reputed to be the founder of this magnetic philosophy. He did, indeed, employ the actual magnet in medicine, recommending its use, inasmuch as it attracted martial humours, in fluxes, inflammatory diseases, hysteria, and epilepsy. But with Paracelsus the "magnet" was commonly spoken of in a metaphorical sense, and with his later disciples its actual use in therapeutics seems to have been almost entirely discontinued. Maxwell, in his treatise *De Medicina Magnetica*, hardly mentions the magnet at all; and Fludd uses it simply as illustrating by its behaviour the interaction of living bodies in the sympathetic system. In brief, the mystics of this period regarded the magnet less as possessing a special virtue in itself than as presenting in miniature a picture of the forces which governed the universe. The action of the magnet at a distance was ascribed to a force or fluid—for its exact nature is usually left undefined—radiating from its substance; and a like force is inferred to radiate from the stars, from the human body, and from all substances in the universe: each body thus reciprocally affecting and being affected by all the rest. Moreover, these rays were not lifeless or fortuitous, but were guided in their incidence and their operations by the indwelling spirit of the body from which they proceeded—a spirit of which the stream of light or other palpable rays formed merely

#### THE SYMPATHETIC SYSTEM

the gross vehicle. Thus Fludd writes: "The Etheriall Sperm, or Astralicall influences, are of a far subtiler condition than is the vehicle of visible light. . . . It is not the starry light which penetrateth so deeply, or operateth so universally, but the Eternal Centrall Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Again, the duality of the forces resident in the magnet was interpreted as typifying the dual or reciprocal action which, manifesting itself as flux and reflux, light and darkness, heat and cold, masculine and feminine, systole and diastole, centrifugal and centripetal force, formed the rhythm of the material universe.

Further, the man himself was understood to be a microcosm, or miniature reflection of the whole complex world; as Fludd puts it, "Man containeth in himself no otherwise his heavens, circles, poles, and stars, than the great world doth."<sup>2</sup> It followed, therefore, that man comprised in his body the virtues of a magnet; nay, that his body, like this planet, was one large magnet, though philosophers differed as to the exact disposition of the corporeal poles. Moreover, any substance, especially any living thing, to which was imparted of the body of the living man, or even any of his waste products, such as sweat and the clippings of the nails or hair, became indued with the like magnetic properties.<sup>3</sup> And from the living tissues of the man, or from such waste products, could be compounded a magnet of wondrous remedial virtue. It is this magnet—the *magnes microsmi*—which Paracelsus and his successors commonly understood by the words "magnet" and "magnetical."

It is, then, on these ideas—the radiation from all things, but especially the stars, magnets, and human bodies, of a force which would act on all things else, and which was in each case directed by the indwelling spirit, together with the conception of a perpetual contest between reciprocal and opposing forces—that the mysticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mainly depends. Again, upon these ideas, combined with the Paracelsian doctrine of Signatures, and the proposition, itself a corollary from the doctrine of the

<sup>1</sup> *Mosaicall Philosophy* (London, 1659), p. 221. Cf. Maxwell, *De Medicina Magnetica* (Frankfort, 1679), p. 3. "Ab omni corpore radii corporales fluunt, in quibus anima sua praesentia operatur, hisque energiam et potentiam operandi largitur." And again, Aphorism xvii., "Stellae vitalem spiritum corpori disposito ligant per lucem et calorem, eidemque iisdem mediis infundunt." And again, Alkindus, quoted by Fludd, "Mundus elementarius est exemplum Mundi Syderei . . . manifestum est quod omnis res hujus mundi radios faciat suo more ad instar Syderum." <sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Quodlibet corpus, cui mummia viva in alio homine propinatur, illico fit magnus (Paracelsus, quoted by Fludd, *op. cit.*).